

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS  
FORT WORTH DIVISION**

360 DEGREE EDUCATION, LLC *et al.*,

*Plaintiffs,*

v.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION, *et al.*,

*Defendants.*

No. 4:24-cv-00508-P

**DECLARATION OF SHARI MECCA**

I, Shari Mecca, do declare under penalty of perjury, and pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1746, that the following is true and accurate to the best of my information and belief:

1. I am employed by the United States Department of Education (Department) as one of the case managers for Federal Student Aid's (FSA) Multi-Regional and Foreign Schools Participation Division. As a case manager, I am responsible for the general oversight of 10 large school groups that participate in the Title IV programs and are located in multiple states across the country. I have been employed by the Department since April 10, 2010. I make the statements below based on my personal knowledge and information I have obtained in my official capacity.

2. One of the large school groups I oversee is Ryan Ross, LLC, which is owned 100% by Neal Hellar. Ryan Ross owns 7 corporations that operate postsecondary institutions participating in the Title IV programs. Those corporations are Outside the Box Education LLC, Education to Vocation LLC, 360 Degree Education LLC, Full Circle Education LLC, Innovative Education

LLC, Way Beyond Education LLC and Beauty Career's Institute, Inc. These corporations are all incorporated in the state of Florida and have their corporate offices in that state. The seven corporations operate 11 postsecondary institutions under the brands Cortiva Institute, Hollywood Institute, and Hollywood Institute of Beauty Careers. The Cortiva Institute brand was purchased from Steiner Education Group, Inc. in 2019. The 11 institutions are located in Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Connecticut. According to the Department's College Navigator website, as of June 2024, the enrollment for the 11 schools was approximately 2400, with about 65% of that student population attending locations in Florida.

3. 360 Degree Education LLC (360 Degree) participates in the Title IV programs under a Program Participation Agreement with the Department identifier OPE ID 02279600. 360 Degree operates two Cortiva Institute (Cortiva) locations, one in St. Petersburg, Florida and one in Arlington, Texas. The St. Petersburg location is designated as the main location for the institution and the Arlington, Texas location is designated as an additional location. Cortiva participates in Title IV student aid programs pursuant to a single Program Participation Agreement that covers both the Florida and the Texas locations. As of June 2024, the Arlington, Texas location had approximately 108 students.

4. To be eligible to participate in the Title IV programs, institutions must be licensed by the state in which they operate and must be approved by an accreditor recognized by the Department. *See* 34 C.F.R. §§ 600.4, 600.5, 600.6. The Florida location of Cortiva is licensed by the Florida Department of Education/Commission for Independent Education, and the Texas location is licensed by the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR). Both schools are accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC).

5. For education programs offered at eligible postsecondary institutions to be eligible for Title IV funding, the programs must be legally authorized by the state and approved by the institution's accreditor. The Department approves the programs based on the credits or clock hours approved by the state and the accreditor.

6. When the Department reviewed the request for a change of ownership of Cortiva to Ryan Ross, LLC, the staff only reviewed the general licensing documents and did not request additional program length information from TDLR. At that time, the program length listed in the Department records for the Massage programs at Cortiva in St. Petersburg, Florida and Arlington, Texas was 600 clock hours. This matched the accreditor approval documents.

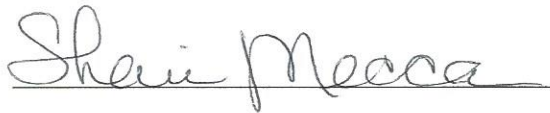
7. After the filing of the Complaint in this case, I contacted TDLR to see if Cortiva had submitted an application to reduce the number of hours in its Professional Massage Therapy Program (Massage) program offered at its Arlington location from 600 to 500, the minimum required for licensure, based on the Department's revision of program regulation 34 C.F.R. § 668.448(b)(26) that is set to go into effect on July 1, 2024. Lorraine Sroufe, Education and School Services Manager, from TDLR responded to my question, notifying me that they had not received any request from Cortiva for such an action. Ms. Sroufe informed me that Cortiva's Massage Program was only approved for 500 hours and provided me the certificate, dated 9/1/2020, included as Attachment A. Ms. Sroufe further informed me that Texas state law does not allow massage programs in Texas to be approved for hours in excess of the required 500 hours.

10. Based on allegations in this Complaint that Cortiva in Arlington was losing Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits as a result of the Department's revised program length regulation, I contacted the Texas Veterans Commission State Approving Agency (SAA) for Texas to follow

up on this claim. I spoke to David Salgado, who is the Director of the Texas Veterans Commission. He informed me that Cortiva had submitted a request for approval of a 600-hour massage program for its Arlington, Cortiva campus. He stated that the SAA had denied approval for a 600-hour program because the Arlington program was only approved for 500 hours by the State of Texas.

11. On June 12, 2024, I reviewed the website of Bellus Academy and obtained the screen shot, included as Attachment B, from the URL <https://bellusacademy.edu/membership-and-accreditation/>, which lists the institution's memberships. The Coalition for Career Schools is not identified among Bellus Academy's memberships on that URL.

Executed on this 12<sup>th</sup> day of June 2024.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shari Mecca". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Shari Mecca

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# TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF LICENSING AND REGULATION

## MASSAGE THERAPY COURSE CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

### CORTIVA INSTITUTE

SCHOOL LICENSE: MS1072

ISSUE DATE: 09/01/2020

The school is authorized to offer the course noted below in accordance with the Massage Therapy Law §455.156 for License Requirements for Massage Therapist.

### Massage Therapy 500 Hour Course

CORTIVA INSTITUTE, SCHOOL LICENSE MS1072 currently holds an active school license with the department originally issued 07/26/2019. If the approved course is no longer being offered, the school must contact the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, Education and Examination Division within 30 days so that the school's record is updated. This certificate certifies that CORTIVA INSTITUTE has met the applicable provisions of the Massage Therapy Texas Occupations Code §455; and Massage Therapy Program Administrative Rules, 16 Texas Administrative Code, Chapter 117.

**Ray Pizarro**  
**DIRECTOR, EDUCATION & EXAMINATION DIVISION**

ATTACHMENT A



## MEMBERSHIPS:

- American Association of Cosmetology Schools  
<http://www.beautyschools.org/>
- American Massage Therapy Association  
<http://www.amtamassage.org/>
- Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals  
<http://www.abmp.com/home/index.html>
- California Association of Private Postsecondary Schools  
<http://www.cappsonline.org/>
- CECU: Career Education Colleges and Universities  
<https://www.career.org>
- Comite International d'Esthetique et de Cosmetologie (CIDESCO)  
<https://cidesco.com>
- The Day Spa Association  
<http://www.dayspaassociation.com/>
- International Spa Association  
<http://www.experienceispa.com/>
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators  
<http://www.nafsa.org/>
- National Cosmetology Association  
<http://www.ncacares.org/>
- Professional Beauty Association  
<http://www.probeauty.org/about/>